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ABSTRACT

Designing a women's studies course that would be truly interdisciplinary, and not merely multidisciplinary as most such courses usually are, requires an understanding of the fundamental differences between the aims and outlooks of the humanities and the social sciences. The humanities are more concerned with process than product, with judgment more than measurement, and with quality more than quantity. Unlike the methods of the social sciences, which are directed toward finding answers, the methods of the humanities accommodate the tentative and the mysterious. "Misuse" of literature by practitioners of other disciplines as well as their perception that literary studies are "soft learning" also mitigates against successful integration. On the other hand, the teacher of literature must recognize the importance of the insights these disciplines can yield, and must be prepared to sacrifice some process--time for close reading, for example--to product. In mutual compromise, the real question is not who gives up what, but whether the disciplines gain or lose by the creation of what is, in effect, a new paradigm. In the creation of a particular women's studies course, "Images," this new paradigm allowed resistance to the closure of chronological treatment. Interdisciplinary fields such as women's studies can serve as the model for the new paradigm, one which will help reshape both the humanities and the social sciences. (JL)

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RESISTING CLOSURE:
INTEGRATING THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

The present interest in interdisciplinary studies, prompted as much by our fear that the center will not hold as by our conviction that all knowledge may be a seamless garment, has gained impetus from the belief that such studies may help to improve the state of the humanities. Traditionally, the academic disciplines have been distinguished by differences in content and method, and when they "overlap," practitioners tend to exert their own territorial imperatives. As a result, in the planning of interdisciplinary courses, instructors often resist the integrative in favor of the sequential, designing what the Rockefeller Commission Report on The Humanities in American Life calls "shoddy, ill-conceived courses that merely dilute a variety of subjects rather than unite them in any coherent or imaginative synthesis."[1]

When interdisciplinary means multi-disciplinary, there is little process; the participants retreat within the parameters of acceptable inquiry in their own disciplines, and the economist, the historian, the psychologist, the sociologist, and the literary critic each design a three week segment and contribute a question or two to the exam. Integration, in such courses, is the students' responsibility. But when faculty members attempt to design an interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary course, process is almost everything, and their various modes of inquiry insinuate themselves into that process.

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Because Women's Studies are typically multi-disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary, they have not yet provided a strong model for integration, but they are eminently suited to do so. In our eagerness to learn and to teach more about the experience of women, however, we need to be aware of the kinds of compromises we are willing to make regarding our own disciplines. When I was invited to help plan and teach an NEH-funded course in Women's Studies with a psychologist, a sociologist, and an historian, I was exhilarated--not, I confess, because I thought unselfishly about the benefits which would accrue to our students, but because I thought about how much I myself would learn. As we began, I realized that in the process of designing a course about images of 19th and 20th century American women, we were also trying to integrate the humanities--literature and history--with the social sciences--psychology and sociology.

I am not, nor was I meant to be, a social scientist, and the "idols of the laboratory," described so eloquently by Susanne Langer--physicalism, prescriptive methodology, jargon, objectivity, mathematization--are not my idols. I do not speak of "homonid individuals" rather than persons, of "verbal behavior" instead of "speech," nor do I substitute "stimulus to verbal behavior" for "clinical interview." I cannot even construct a "mathematical expression of known or presumed regularities in behavior." And I agree with Langer that "the

motivations of human beings in moral and emotional conflicts springing from a more or less permanent, oppressive social situation are so different from the motivations of a rat which has not been fed for forty-eight hours that they do not offer any comparable patterns."[2] In other words, Mother Courage is not Minnie Mouse.

I did know that in the kind of inquiry which humanists conduct, process is more important than product, judgment more important than measurement, quality more significant than quantity, qualification more interesting than quantification, complexity more compelling than simplicity, values more critical than external behavior, dialogue and dialectic more compelling than the final solution. In fact, the humanities politely resist closure: charged by meaning rather than by fact, they do not seek to uncover the laws governing certain phenomena. Unlike the methods of the social sciences, which are directed toward finding answers, the methods of the humanities accommodate the tentative and the mysterious. We have only to remember the long tradition of Antigones and Lady Macbeths to illustrate this.

Whereas the social sciences deal with particulars within the framework of universals, the humanities, as Robert J. Henle says, deal with the universals in the framework of particulars.[3] Some of us in the humanities do not fit comfortably into a society which demands instant gratification

and which moves toward future shock too quickly to allow for the contemplation which our disciplines require. For us, numbers are more symbolic than factual, and we feel closer to modern physics than we do to modern sociology.

On the other hand, I remember that Pitrim Sorokin and Margaret Mead had spoken to me when I was an undergraduate, that Freud and others had gone to the Greek drama to find their ur-texts in complexes, that Robert Coles, M.D. had written about the children of Appalachia with grace and humanistic insight. I know, in other words, that not all social scientists adore the idols of the laboratory. Since the course I was involved in planning would have as one of its objectives the analysis of stereotypes of women, it was only fitting that I come to it without stereotypes of my own.

Although I recognized the variations within the social sciences, however, I not only remained ambivalent about method, but I also recalled my uneasiness over the manner in which literature had been "used" by instructors in other disciplines. My long-felt discomfort concerning this phenomenon was caused by the tension between my desire to support the elimination of unnatural disciplinary boundaries and my suspicion that historians, philosophers, and others included literary works in their syllabi to serve ends other than those of art. My anxiety had been validated some time ago when a professor of politics, expounding on the virtues of Penelope, observed that she was obviously superior to Odysseus. I

asked him why, if that were true, the rational Greeks had enlisted Odysseus to go to Troy instead of Penelope, and he said that she had not wanted to go. When I inquired as to where he had found that in the text, he replied that he didn't know if it was in the text or not, whereupon I announced that Penelope had moaned and groaned for weeks after Odysseus left because she had been passed over, that she had "learned war" for years in preparation for such an opportunity, and that that wasn't in the text either.

Literature can be read on many levels, as we are fond of saying when our students come up with unexpected readings, but informing any reading worthy of its salt is our sense of the text as aesthetic form. This respect for text, which most feminist criticism has served to deepen, is the common ground of our profession. But when a work of literature is discussed in a history or psychology or philosophy course, will its readers respect the integrity of the work? Or will students be led to accept, instead, the part for the whole?

Literature is not an untouchable, and I do not claim for it that status. I do not even share Matthew Arnold's faith in the power of literature to shape the virtuous person. One of the deep and far-ranging effects of the Holocaust is that the appreciation which many Nazis had for literature, music, and art had tested Arnold and found him wanting. Emma Bovary, Mattie Silver, and Edna Pontellier

may not be models for our emulation, whatever our understanding of their motives and acts, and Jacques Barzun may be right when he calls the humanities the "mis-behavioral sciences." Still, whatever the mode of existence of the work of art, analysis and synthesis depend on the text, and that whole is greater than the sum of its parts, its external analysis and synthetic reconstruction.

Alfred North Whitehead says that a clash of doctrines ought to be viewed as an opportunity, not a disaster, and that is as good a guideline for planning interdisciplinary courses as any other. Our opportunity as a team was to integrate a method which valued reflection on concrete experience with one which abstracted from that experience. Kluckhohn had said: "If a friend of mine wants to find out in a short time what makes rural Poles tick, I should certainly send him to Ladislas Reymont's novel The Peasants and not to the social science classic The Polish Peasant, by Thomas and Znaniecki. Malinowski's best monographs on the Trobrianders are not in a class with Willa Cather's My Antonia or Rebecca West's Black Land and Grey Falcon so far as conveying with imaginative reality the inner workings of a society and the motivation of individual actors in that society."[4] I would do the same, of course, but in order to design an interdisciplinary course, I had to find ways of integrating a Malinowski and a Cather.

One of the barriers to such integration is the perception that the study of social science is more rigorous than the study of literature. Although literature is the most flexible of disciplines in that

it seems to be adaptable to a number of others and itself accommodates a great number, it is perceived as soft learning. It does not deal much with facts, and its truth--literary truth--is untestable in any laboratory. In spite of the caveats concerning statistics and variables, the social sciences provide ostensible answers. The statement that 49% of women work because they have to is a more powerful "truth" for many than the experience of reading "I Stand Here Ironing." In addition, the discussion of the results of such studies requires less interpretation of text than does the discussion of literary works. As a result, the interdisciplinary course requires that the teacher of literature sacrifice some process to product. What we sometimes forget is that the social scientists must do the reverse, and that the real question is whether the disciplines gain or lose by the creation of what is, in effect, a new paradigm.

I don't presume to know the answer to that question, though I am obsessed with its complexities. In designing our course, for instance, our first impulse was to structure it chronologically, that is, historically, but we resisted that closure. Because the course was titled "Images," we considered alternative structures, especially after discovering that the pervasive images of women had not altered substantially during the past two centuries. To structure the course chronologically, then, was to give the appearance of a progression which we would not be able to substantiate. We therefore abandoned the historical structure and moved carefully toward the identification of those images of women which we found telling.

This process aided us a great deal in conceptualizing the course. When we decided to deal with the images of social feminism, for instance, we chose Jane Addams as its avatar, and both sociology and history had a great deal to offer here, as well as psychology because of Addams' history of illness and her motives for beginning the settlement house movement. In Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "A Drop in the Bucket," we found a story which was not about social work per se: it was instead about a woman who does what Addams does, but on a small and personal scale. We saw the connections here between the private and public images which we were using as our overarching organization, the connections between private and public domesticity.

By undergoing this process over and over again, we constructed a truly interdisciplinary course, not only because we learned more about each other's disciplines, but also because we learned the limits of our own. Sometimes we made compromises, perhaps beyond what some of us were willing to make. For literature, the greatest was the yielding of time for close reading. Facts and numbers have power, and literary truth can sometimes pale into irrelevance unless there is time for close reading and dialogue, for readers' responses. Nevertheless, I believe that the course is more a humanities course than it is a social science course, especially in method. The greatest evidence of this is that we were unable and unwilling to categorize our images simplistically; they were all complexity. Catharine Beecher, for instance, was the high priest of domesticity, but

she was also the supporter of women as teachers. The sentimental novelists wrote about independent and strong heroines able to make their own way in the world but who threw it all aside for wedded bliss. Even Philip Wylie, whose portrait of Cinderella-become- "Mom" made him famous and infamous, came to the edge of insight and often sounded a lot like Betty Friedan.

At the end of "Idols of the Laboratory," Susanne Langer says that it is conceivable "that the study of mental and social phenomena will never be 'natural science' in the familiar sense at all, but will always be more akin to history, which is a highly developed discipline, but not an abstractly codified one." And there is some reason to believe that that may be true. At the 1980 Annual Meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies, Kenneth Prewitt, president of the Social Science Research Council, said that the social sciences are experiencing an uneasiness over their inability to explain important issues and that his colleagues were "groping toward the humanities...for some kind of more effective linkage with humanists" over the next decade. He went on to say that these connections were necessary "not because a little art is good for the soul, but because we're not getting very clear explanations of some of the phenomena we need to explain.... What are called for are links with the humanities that are as professional, rigorous, and carefully considered as the present links with statistics and

mathematics, with a goal of making the social sciences equally adept at quantification and narration." In spite of their attempt to emulate and adopt the methodology of science and to seek solutions, the social sciences are dealing more and more with the tentative, the mysterious. Publications more prestigious than Newsweek have commented on the fractured state of psychological theory, for instance, which may also be a kind of resistance to closure.

Because Women's Studies have been interdisciplinary from the beginning, they can serve as the model for the new paradigm. But this will require of us enormous intellectual energy and commitment. It will require us to be "resisting readers" in other disciplines as well as in our own, to be willing to reshape our discipline without distorting it, and to risk the unknown. I used to tell the other members of the team that everything we wanted to do for our students could be done through literature. I was only half joking, but it was the half that I could not and would not compromise. It was the half which knew, no matter what, that "Feeling, in the broad sense of whatever is felt in any way, as sensory stimulus or inward tension, pain, emotion or intent, is the mark of mentality."

REFERENCES

[1]*The Humanities in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 76.

[2]"The Idols of the Laboratory," *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, v. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), pp. 35-46 *passim*.

[3]"The Humanistic Perspective," *Federation Reports*, 2 (Sept 1978), 29.

[4]Ibid., 30. Henle is quoting Kluckhohn.